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Negro Leagues project marks history

By Greg Garber
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ALSIP, Ill. -- Snowflakes drift down from a leaden, foreboding sky and you can feel the cold air congealing at the edge of your nostrils. Yet, in the wind-chilled air, there is an overwhelming sense of serenity surrounding this gated community south of Chicago.

A blustery winter afternoon isn't exactly prime visiting time at Burr Oak Cemetery, but Dr. Jeremy Krock seems to operate on a different clock from most folks. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out a small penknife and drops to one knee. Carefully, almost lovingly, he trims away the brown grass that has encroached on the brass marker over Lot 51's Grave No. 11.



Dr. Jeremy Krock at Burr Oak Cemetery.

"I find it an important task, just an obligation," Krock says softly, with conviction.

As men reach middle age, sometimes they reach for ... a muscular Porsche, a younger girlfriend, a darker hair color. Seven years ago, Krock, a 52-year-old children's anesthesiologist from Peoria, Ill., had an epiphany.

Gradually, a personal curiosity grew into a, well, a crusade. Krock, a husband and father of two boys, had always been a fan of baseball, but a 2003 traveling National Baseball Hall of Fame exhibit at the Field Museum in Chicago was the spark that spurred this evolving passion. He was in the gift shop, leafing through a book about the Negro Leagues, when a passage about John "Jimmie" Crutchfield drew his attention.

The project

For more on this story, watch "Outside the Lines" on Sunday at 9 a.m. ET on ESPN. Greg Garber's story also will appear on "SportsCenter."

For more on the Negro Leagues Baseball Grave Marker Project, [visit the website](#).

Growing up, Krock often visited his grandparents in Ardmore, Mo.

"I heard the stories of Jimmie Crutchfield," Crock said. "I think he was a sense of pride for the family that here was this famous person that came from Ardmore."

Escaping the mines

Cemeteries, for some, are oppressive, mawkish places. Not for Krock, who at an early age learned to honor the past at family reunions. Every Memorial Day -- they called it "Decoration Day" -- he and his family would pack a big lunch and make their way around town.

"We'd be out there, going cemetery to cemetery," Krock recalled. "My Uncle Joe would be driving a truck and Aunt Bea would have the back end of it filled with bud vases and fresh peonies or silk flowers. Everyone got their graves covered on Decoration Day."

Ardmore was a coal-mining town, but Crutchfield -- the "Mighty Mite from Moberly, [Mo.]" -- escaped the mines and became a terrific ballplayer.

Crutchfield, a 5-foot-7, 145-pound outfielder, started out with the Birmingham Black Barons and later joined the legendary Pittsburgh Crawfords. Crutchfield, along with "Cool" Papa Bell and Ted Strong, was part of what was considered by many the most talented outfield in the Negro Leagues. If there was a ball hit to Crutchfield in the outfield, his teammates used to say, they'd start walking to the dugout without even looking. They knew he'd catch it; he was that solid.

A young Krock, hearing the name come up again and again, asked naively if Crutchfield played for the St. Louis Cardinals, the region's favorite major league team.

"They said no," Krock said. "And they tried to explain the Negro Leagues to me at that time. I didn't totally understand it then, and I still don't understand it."

'Separate but equal'

Alvin Spearman, a pitcher for the Chicago American Giants from 1949-51, was acquainted with Crutchfield, who after a 15-year career worked for the U.S. Post Office in Chicago.

"Jimmie Crutchfield was a gentleman," Spearman said. "He's in that [class] almost with Cool Papa Bell. I can't say enough good about him."

Being an African-American, though, Crutchfield was barred from playing in the major leagues. Jim Crow laws throughout the country, calling for "separate but equal" status for blacks, were upheld by a U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in 1896 and the Negro Leagues were the only



Dr. Jeremy Krock is determined to find the grave sites of Negro Leagues players.



professional option.

Alvin Spearman pitched in the Negro Leagues.

"When I was playing, the country was divided, everything was either Negro or white," Spearman said. "Drinking fountains, restaurants, rest rooms, you name it. In organized baseball, there was a gentleman's agreement not to allow blacks.

"It wasn't a matter of ability, it was a matter of color."

While there had been numerous independent black teams going back to the 1880s, it wasn't until 1920 that the eight-team Negro National League was formed. Soon, more leagues emerged and, through the 1930s and '40s, the Negro Leagues flourished with stars like Satchel Paige, Monte Irvin, Buck Leonard and Judy Johnson, who would later -- much later -- be enshrined in the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

After seeing the blurb on Crutchfield, Krock wondered what had become of him. Krock went home and did some online digging. He contacted one of the book's authors and tracked down the funeral home that handled Crutchfield's arrangements after he died in 1993. Ten years later, Krock was with his family at the Burr Oak Cemetery office asking for directions to Crutchfield's plot.

"We looked around, trying to find the marker that said 'Jimmy Crutchfield' and there was none to be found," Krock said, standing on the very spot, not far from the front gate. "I was really stunned. I thought the most famous person from Ardmore would definitely have a grave marker.

"I realized it at the time, that we should make this right."

Insult to a community

For 60 years, beginning in 1948, Vero Beach, Fla., was Dodgertown, one of the Grapefruit League's sweetest spots.

But the Dodgers left after the 2008 spring training season for Glendale, Ariz., and the Baltimore Orioles were heavily recruited in 2010 but ultimately declined to leave their home in Fort Lauderdale. Holman Stadium, once a hub of spring training activity, is empty. Last year, the city renamed it Vero Beach Sports Village, a venue that plays hosts to baseball tournaments and monster trucks jams.

Not far away, tucked into a lush neighborhood on the dry side of Route 1A, is the place Fay Vincent calls home. There are three fragile-looking orchids in the foyer and a canister of about a dozen canes. A college prank gone wrong -- he was locked in his dorm room as a prank and climbed out on to a roof to escape -- sent him pitching four stories to the ground, bruising his spinal cord and damaging his legs forever. Still, he found the fire to graduate from Yale Law School, become executive vice president of Coca-Cola and, following the death of his great friend Bart Giamatti, the eighth commissioner of baseball.



Fay Vincent, former baseball commissioner, applauds Krock's efforts.

Vincent was on the job for three cathartic years, wrestling with the earthquake that interrupted the 1989 World Series in San Francisco, the owners' lockout of 1990 and the travails of George Steinbrenner and Pete Rose. He left the post in 1992 but has undeniably stayed in the game.

In 2003, Vincent was reading a newsletter of the Society of Baseball Research's Negro Leagues committee when an item on Crutchfield caught his eye. It was a letter, written by Krock, that explained he had found Crutchfield's unmarked grave and was looking for \$400 in donations to cover the cost of a marker. Vincent, who had met Crutchfield and liked him, noted the address and later sent along a generous contribution.

"When you think about the great tragedies, what could have been greater than being a good black athlete, having the talent, believing you were good enough to play, and being excluded," said Vincent, sitting in his corner study. "It was one of the great insults to a community.

"One of the reasons I've been so committed to black baseball and the black community is I don't think any group was ever treated as shabbily as the black ballplayers who wanted to play baseball."

White Sox owner Jerry Reinsdorf and five-time major league manager Don Zimmer also gave money. In September 2004, Krock held a ceremony at Burr Oak Cemetery, where he honored Crutchfield, pitcher John Donaldson and "Candy Jim" Taylor with plaques to mark their graves.

"It completed a cycle as far as my connection with my family and Ardmore," Krock said. "But it started a new cycle, the Negro League Grave Marker Project. In a way, it closed a chapter and, at the same time, opened up a lot more for us."

Opening consciousness

As Krock pursued leads on Double Duty Radcliff and Bobby Robinson and Pete Hill, his sons, Mitchell and Spencer, were impressed with his sense of urgency.

"Everyone should be treated equally, and they really weren't back then," said Spencer Krock, 16. "In some cases, there were Negro League players that had more talent than some in the major leagues. I think it's important to recognize that everyone has potential."

Last year, Spencer did a research paper on how Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in 1947. He said he got a "really good grade" on it, but more importantly it connected him with what his dad was doing.



Spencer and Mitchell Krock have taken up the cause with their father.

"It surprised me," Spencer said, "because everyone is human and everyone should be treated the same way."

Mitchell, 17, has also done research on blacks in baseball.

"I learned about some of the teams in the early years of the Negro Leagues," Mitchell said. "I know 'Steel Arm Johnny' [Taylor], a fast pitcher, who's buried here in Peoria. Satchel Paige got his name because he was supposedly caught stealing briefcases as a child."

Krock's eyes gleam proudly when he hears these details from his sons. In the age of the Internet, slices of history can get lost forever. Krock has helped pass the oral history of the Negro Leagues to the next generation.

In all, 20 grave markers of past stars have been placed around the country. Next is Frank Grant, a wizard of a second baseman who was enshrined in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 2006 along with 16 other African-American contributors to the Negro Leagues, in part, thanks to an initiative by Vincent.

"The black Negro League players preserved baseball in the black community," Vincent said. "And if they hadn't, we might not have had Bob Gibson, Willie Mays, Hank Aaron or Ernie Banks playing the game."

"Dr. Krock has done a terrific job opening up people's consciousness to this. I think it is really a small, really minuscule sort of indication of our own regret. It was people who understood what a tragedy the apartheid here was. It makes me feel as if we have done a tiny bit to say we're sorry."

Krock said there is still much work to do.

"They played in anonymity," he said. "I don't want to see them buried forever in anonymity. That's part of the Ardmore family in me. We have a master list of Negro League players that died in the Chicago area. We've only touched the surface."

Greg Garber is a senior writer for ESPN.com.